



## At the Renwick

THE DEMANDING CRAFT OF creating turned-wood objects, cut from that unforgiving material as it spins on a lathe, was once confined largely to high school shop classes, the home workshop or the factory.

But for 70 or more years now, artisans have appropriated this technique, producing sophisticated, satisfying pieces, ranging from salad bowls to trinket boxes, vases and abstract sculptures.

"Wood Turning since 1930," at the Renwick Gallery from March 15 through July 14, traces the evolution of this increasingly popular, and collectible, craft form.

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## Symbols in the Sand

CHALK, MODELING CLAY and 20 bowls of brightly colored sand might sound more playful than prayerful. But not for a band of Tibetan Buddhist monks, who gathered this January in the depths of the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, there to construct a sacred sand mandala—a tightly balanced, geometric painting depicting the cosmos and attendant deities. Within this tradition of sacred iconography, the mandala depicts the spiritual configuration of the universe, usually taking the form of concentric circles.

The monks were visiting Washington, D.C., on an extended tour of the United States from their base in exile at the Drepung Loseling Monastery in southern India, when the events of September 11 occurred. To offer healing and protection to America, they turned to the same spiritual tool their ancestors relied on in times of crisis and conflict: the mandala. "We felt it was a moral duty [to make one]," says director Geshe Lobsang Tenzin. From thousands of prescribed ancient mandala designs, the Dalai Lama, the monks' spiritual leader, chose the image of the Buddha Akshobhya, a deity of steadfastness.

During their two-week residency at the Sackler, the 20 monks began and ended each day with chanting and meditating—a ritual punctuated by the playing of drums, cymbals and horns,

the ringing of bells and the donning of orange hats with yellow crests. Working in small teams, the monks crouched over a chalk outline, coaxing forth the edges of a slowly widening, brilliantly hued circle of sand. When finished, it would measure almost seven feet in diameter—one of the largest made in the West.

Laboring in near silence

dha Akshobhya. Even a low ridge of modeling clay—a wall enclosing the central deity—disappeared under a multi-striped ribbon of sand. Painstaking? Yes. "But it is more about devotion than patience," observes Sherdrup Gyeltsen. "You feel you are doing something good, something very positive."

Mistakes happen. "But the good thing about sand is, if



Constructing an ephemeral masterpiece, Tibetan monks at the Sackler work in brilliantly hued sand to create a sacred painting.

and without written instructions, each of the four or five monks on duty held in one hand a cone-shaped metal funnel, called a *chak-pur*, through which the sand flowed, much like ink through a fine-tipped pen. With the other hand, he grasped a small rod, scraping a grated ridge on the shaft of the *chak-pur* and thereby regulating the flow of sand.

As grain after fine grain fell onto the raised surface, sharply etched images emerged: a lotus here, a parasol there, next a wheel, each surrounding the Bud-

you pour over it, you can hide a mistake," says Geshe Lobsang, smiling. He and his companions plan to construct mandalas in dozens of other American cities over the next year.

With the completion of the Sackler mandala January 27, only one task remained: to dismantle it and release the sand into the nearby Tidal Basin. "It's a gesture to share the prayers and blessings with the whole world," says Geshe Lobsang. "And to remind us of the impermanence of things."

—Victoria Davieson